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MODEL CITIES COMMUNITY INFORMATION CENTER, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

In accord with the times, the Free Library of Philadelphia has for the past several years been actively seeking and implementing new ways to serve the inner city. As affluent America moves to the suburbs and invisible America emerges, the need for providing some sort of continuum of informational and cultural exchange has become more apparent. Always in the past the knowledgeable few have managed to tap the vast stores of information hidden away in great libraries, but today neither the human needs of the majority of people can be ignored, nor publicly funded ivory towers stand aside from these needs.

During the late 1960s the Free Library administration considered the possibility of reaching the inner city with a community information and referral center. Early in 1970, however, the library found that a Philadelphia Model Cities group had gone much further with a similar idea, which was also to include plans for the use of three-way phones and a computerized data base. The library was then able to secure Library Services and Construction Act funding through the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and a gentlemen's agreement with the Model Cities Project for a joint venture which was to be known as the Model Cities Community Information Center (MCCIC).

On June 22, 1970, two librarians from the Free Library reported to work along with twenty-five Model Cities employees including one computer systems analyst. A third librarian and a clerk-stenographer have since joined the library component. The MCCIC was designed to have an administrative section, a group of information and referral specialists (manning the system of three-way phones), a community education and training section (to promote public relations), and a data bank section (including the library component). In the beginning, four people worked in the data section—the systems analyst, the two librarians, and one person trained in city planning. For the next three months this section clipped and organized material from thirty-three directories of services available to the 235,000 residents of the North Philadelphia Model Cities area. At first there was an attempt to fit all records under keywords from a preconceived thesaurus, but by October this method was abandoned in favor of

transcribing all records onto formatted sheets and putting all likely keywords in parentheses. By November formatted records were being typed for conversion to magnetic tape storage via an optical character reader (OCR) located at a downtown Philadelphia insurance office. The taped information was then taken to the University of Pennsylvania computer center for transferral to disk memory.

On November 16, the MCCIC officially opened its doors to the public, first on a limited basis, but soon to the entire Model Cities neighborhood. Forty-five telephone cases were handled in November, 338 in December, 680 in January. Thereafter the numbers began to level off to form an almost logarithmic curve. Cases in June totalled 860, and there has been only a gradual rise since.

MCCIC operations began in a rather semiprofessional manner. No one at the project knew much about community information centers. No one had ever built a data bank before, handled three-way phones, or worked in public relations. Hiring, however, was done primarily in the Model Cities area so that lack of experience was somewhat offset by staff rapport with the Black and Spanish-speaking community. Moreover, certain MCCIC staff members quickly developed an expertise and dedication toward serving the public.

The Model Cities area is one of the poorest and most depressed in all of Philadelphia. MCCIC requests to date have been mostly confined to basic, pragmatic questions. For example, during the first few months of operation, one-third of all MCCIC service requests were for emergency food. Librarians who occasionally worked the phones reported such experiences as having to find powdered milk and dry cereal to sustain a family of eight over a weekend, having to locate a coat for an alcoholic on the freezing streets, and, occasionally, having to answer a library-type information question. Many of the calls have come from intermediaries such as agencies and individual caseworkers. However, most of the peripheral questions involving the great range of information accessible to the MCCIC information and retrieval (I&R) specialists have yet to be asked.

In January of 1971 the University of Pennsylvania computer began printing out large quantities of the data bank. Then followed the editing process, a war of attrition against poor typing which had begun during the OCR period and which was to continue for almost two months. Finally on February 22, a truce having been declared, the MCCIC received a 2,986-page printout of information describing some 2,300 services listed under a vast array of keywords. The task since then has been not only to verify all data by letter, phone and agency visit, but to organize a thoroughly integrated thesaurus and an entirely usable data source. In July a printout of completely verified information on high priority agencies and services appeared. This latest collection has been selectively clipped and arranged in multiple

copy on 5" x 8" Rolodex cards, which in turn have been incorporated into a series of ready-access files.

As a brief description of the MCCIC telephone service, one might take the case of a woman who needs free orthopedic shoes for her child. Her call reaches the MCCIC I&R specialist who consults the data bank (or ready-access file) and then telephones agencies in search of an appropriate appointment. The original caller remains on the line, hears the attempts at solution, and contributes to the discussion. Even if the case cannot be resolved, the caller is never turned away with a few phone numbers to try.

To extend data coverage for the Model Cities area, the library component has compiled a verified list of over 2,600 subject headings matched with phone numbers of Free Library subject departments and other special information centers. The list is designed to be used with the data bank by the MCCIC I&R specialists. The introduction to the list contains examples of what can be found there (such as the meaning of a Spanish word, a method for fireproofing curtains, recipes for pork dishes, information on federal policies, etc.) and a warning that accompanying advice (legal, medical, etc.) is not forthcoming. The library component has also obtained from the library subject departments some lists of typical library telephone information questions, and examples of these have now been publicly advertised by the MCCIC community education and training section.

The library component looks forward to placing MCCIC outreach services in Model Cities area branch libraries, but multiplication of the ready-access files and standardization of telephone techniques to accommodate this expansion have not yet been achieved. Nor has the decision been made as to what questions branch librarians should attempt to answer. For example, placing an octogenarian with kidney problems in a special type of nursing home may not only take weeks of work but also a special sort of knowledge and experience. On-line terminals for branch libraries are funded, but these have to await justification of a fully automated system which in turn may depend on extension of MCCIC services to the entire city or region.

Problems of advertising MCCIC-type services in inner-city branch libraries also remain to be solved. How should one encourage social welfare questions within a library which has typically had little use and where librarians have been seldom questioned for any sort of information? Perhaps a new image of librarians as information specialists rather than as bookpeople would be helpful at this time.

The lesson of the MCCIC may not so much concern the extension of library services to include the world of the social worker (although the library is certainly the natural place for *information* of all sorts), as it reemphasizes the idea of a telephone information center. For years libraries have been seeking new ways to place a book in some-

one's hands, while perhaps finding not so many ways to advertise telephone services.

There is perhaps a danger that people would become more dependent if they only had to pick up a phone to ask a question. Maybe librarians would have to do more work. Maybe fewer people would visit the library itself. One can only assume that a strong telephone service would serve all people, scholarly and uneducated, rich and poor. As before, patrons with difficult questions would be encouraged to come to the library. And in an era when cities are running out of money and books seem less than necessary, great information centers could still emerge as obviously essential features of modern life.